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Fertility Change on the American Frontier: Adaptation and Innovation

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ful information to historians of the frontier who look to the pioneer experience as a laboratory of human motivations and values. If he stops short of a definitive cultural history of pioneering, he nevertheless facilitates future research by using a comparative approach to sort the general from the specific. In many ways, because of the wider geographic range and the literary quality of his sources, Hamer faced a tougher task in producing decisive conclusions than did Mahoney, whose territorial and temporal range is much narrower. Nevertheless, Mahoney's *River Towns in the Great West* is an impressive debut. Students of frontier Iowa would do well to read his book very closely, for its publication has raised our standards of research and interpretation substantially.

Fertility Change on the American Frontier: Adaptation and Innovation, by Lee L. Bean, Geraldine P. Mineau, and Douglas L. Anderton. Studies in Demography. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990. xiii, 295 pp. Tables, figures, notes, index. $40.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY DON R. LEET, CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FRESNO

American fertility was legendary even in the eighteenth century. High birth rates and rapid population growth in New England led the English economist T. R. Malthus to conclude that unfettered procreation would lead to a doubling of the human population every twenty-five years. He believed the inevitable result of such population increases would be a catastrophic increase in the death rate. Similar remarks are made today by neo-Malthusian authors who view world population trends as ominous. If Bean and his coauthors are correct, we have little to fear from the demographic doomsayers who predict the demise of humanity based on a neo-Malthusian model of unbridled procreation.

The authors' optimistic results are based on a unique data set from Utah that contains the reproductive records of women who were born between 1800 and 1899 and ceased childbearing by 1940. These records are part of a computerized database built on a set of family records from the Genealogical Society of Utah. Using this database, the authors are able to reconstruct the fertility experience of Utah women from the early nineteenth through the middle of the twentieth century. This allows the authors to test their hypotheses using individual microlevel fertility data, rather than relying on aggregate data from the census. For example, they can link the number of children ever born to a particular birth cohort of women, measure the length of the birth interval for women, calculate the mean age at marriage for

each cohort, and report the average age at last birth for all married women.

The authors report that the fertility rates of early settlers actually rose from 7.1 children ever born (CEB) for the 1800–1804 cohort to 8.2 for the 1840–1854 cohorts. They dub the initial increase in fertility "the frontier effect." Accordingly, they attribute the frontier effect to a region "within which perceived economic opportunities are substantially greater than in other, more populated regions and within which the political-economic system supports relatively open access to resource exploitation" (242). Having done some research on fertility in nineteenth-century Ohio, I support the hypothesis that human fertility adjusts to perceived economic opportunity, but what I fail to find in this volume is any attempt to quantify economic opportunity. The authors make some casual references to previous studies on land availability as a proxy for economic opportunity, but then dismiss the proxy as "too restrictive."

The study also documents the decline in fertility among the Utah population in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Here the authors choose to test the adaptation versus innovation theories. Was the fertility transition the result of settlers *adapting* their behavior to the new economic realities of increased costs of childbearing and decreased benefits of large families? Or was the fertility transition one of *innovation,* where the small family norm was first accepted by an influential group within society who adopted new fertility control techniques that subsequently spread to a majority of the population? The authors of this volume find clear evidence in favor of the adaptation approach. In chapter eight, for example, they analyze the geography of fertility change and conclude that no single region initiated the decline. "A uniform statewide fertility decline" (237) supports the idea that families in all regions were responding (adapting) to the same menu of costs and benefits.

Another reason offered for rejecting the innovation hypothesis is that birth control was not a new phenomenon that had to be diffused from the elite. The population was always capable of limiting fertility; the question was one of motivation, not innovation. Although I agree with the authors about the general level of contraceptive knowledge among American couples, I would like to see more evidence on this point. The authors cite two secondary sources as well as the passage of the Comstock Act, but these are not as solid as one might wish. This is an area where state and local historians could play an important role in evaluating the authors' account of conventional wisdom. Is it true, for example, that Frederick Hollik's *Marriage Guide* had become

so common that there was not a house, cabin, or miner's camp without it? (30).

Much of the work in this volume has already appeared in journals or proceedings volumes. Nevertheless, it will be convenient to have many of the research findings from the Mormon Historical Demography Project summarized in one monograph. By using historical data from the Genealogical Society of Utah, these authors are able to test the conflicting theories that purport to explain American fertility patterns. They find that human reproductive behavior can be explained as a logically consistent adaptive response to economic and social conditions of the time. This conclusion should not surprise anyone who has studied the American experience.

Prophetic Sisterhood: Liberal Women Ministers of the Frontier, 1880–1930, by Cynthia Grant Tucker. Boston: Beacon Press, 1990. xii, 298 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. $24.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY JULIE ROY JEFFREY, GOUCHER COLLEGE

For more than a decade historians have been exploring the complex relationship between nineteenth-century women and Protestantism. Cynthia Grant Tucker carries the investigation forward by focusing on a small group of women who became Unitarian pastors in the Midwest during the last decades of the century. Inspired by liberal theology and Transcendentalism to claim their right to the pulpit, a handful of women took on new or struggling parishes in and around Iowa in the 1880s. Their example, support, and encouragement prompted others to follow them into the ministry; in all, about twenty women belonged to this remarkable network of female ministers.

Despite their rejection of conventional patriarchal religion and their emphasis on female equality, Tucker shows that the women ministers did not break away entirely from prevailing ideas of woman's role. Picturing themselves as "mothers of congregations," the women operated within the parameters of domesticity (64). They created homelike churches that became welcoming centers for their congregations and their communities. Activities ranging from kindergarten classes, adult study groups, and gym classes to women's clubs, emphasizing female talents rather than subservience, supplemented Sunday services. Although many ministers elsewhere had given up parish visiting, the female pastors continued the practice as part of their outreach to the community. Tucker aptly characterizes these women as "nurturant" and points out that the "maternal aura" they